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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001433

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM IZ JO MEPP

SUBJECT: LOOKING AHEAD: JORDANIAN ELECTIONS AFTER AN IRAQ WAR: A CHANCE TO SHOWCASE DEMOCRACY?

REF: AMMAN 1336

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

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Summary

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¶11. (C) We believe it is essential that we start to think seriously about Jordan's position in a post-Iraq war environment: what the GOJ will expect us to do, and how Jordan can contribute to achieving our longer term regional goals. Assuming that a military campaign is of limited duration and fully successful, the King will focus on a number of issues soon after military action ceases. These will include pushing for (1) a renewed U.S. emphasis on the MEPP and (2) a positive and credible U.S. message to the region that will reinforce his own domestic reform efforts.

¶12. (C) Looking to our own priorities, Jordan's parliamentary elections now scheduled for June 17 (reftel) will offer an important (and probably the first post-war) opportunity for the U.S. to highlight and encourage democracy in the Arab world. Given the deep skepticism that permeates Arab perceptions of U.S. ambitions in the region, we will need to quickly find ways to demonstrate that our democratizing rhetoric prior to military action is translated into concrete and positive expression following it. Jordanian Parliamentary elections that are free, fair, and credible could help provide a timely model for the President's vision of a reformed and progressive Middle East. To that end, we should think at two levels: (1) helping create the broader political context in the region that will facilitate the kind of campaign and election results that support our interests in broadening democracy in the Arab world generally, and (2) providing (at a programmatic level and with a light touch) assistance that facilitates the electoral process without appearing to meddle. If we do this right, it could have positive effects not only for Jordan, but for our influence, both long and short-term, in the Post-Saddam Middle East.  
End Summary.

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A Reenergized MEPP:

Step 1 in Rebuilding Credibility with The Street

¶13. (C) As the King, FM and PM have all made clear to senior Washington decision makers, there is no more important issue in the hearts and minds of Jordanians than Palestine. The relentless conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and the belief among most here that the U.S. has abdicated its historic role as "honest broker," has done more to hurt U.S. credibility with the average Jordanian than any other single factor -- and, in turn, has forced the GOJ to adopt a defensive tone when characterizing the U.S.-Jordan relationship to its citizens.

¶14. (C) In order to begin to reverse this current reality, the King will press us to move forward quickly to reenergize the MEPP and demonstrate clearly the political will to restart serious negotiations, press Israel to take positive steps, and forge a solution that brings peace and security to both Israelis and Palestinians. In and of itself, such an approach will not mend our frayed image and influence. Without it, however, the task is likely to be impossible.

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A Message We (And He) Can Take to the People

¶15. (C) A broader USG message should also address the corrosive effects of months of virulent anti-American rhetoric throughout the region. By demonstrating -- through our actions not only our words -- that we are on the side of average people, and that our actions are emphatically not "a war against Islam," the greater resonance our efforts will have with Jordanian audiences. This will help not only to rebuild a pro-U.S. constituency in the Kingdom, but will also help support the King's own program to steer Jordan in a progressive, pro-Western direction.

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June 17 Elections: Showcasing Democracy in the Arab World

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16. (C) As we consider what the King and GOJ will ask of us and how we can help Jordan after a war, we should recognize that political developments here will inevitably contribute greatly to the pattern of our goals and strategy for the region in the eyes of Jordanians and all their neighbors. An important marker in this regard will be the upcoming Parliamentary elections -- which the PM recently announced would be held on June 17. If handled adroitly, these elections may offer a timely opportunity to highlight the possibilities and promise of democracy in the Arab world.

17. (C) It is in our interests -- and the GOJ's -- that these elections be inclusive, spirited, and reflect a broad debate on Jordan's future. The structure of the elections -- single-member constituencies -- will almost certainly result in a pro-Hashemite majority, but one with traditional tribal views. That said, we would also want to see an end result that reflects a genuine commitment to democratic reforms.

18. (C) In our view, the best way to accomplish this objective is to help create the broader political context that neutralizes those issues that detract attention from that agenda: the most obvious example being Palestine. The relative popularity of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, is rooted more in its steadfast rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause and opposition to an Iraq war than in its policy prescriptions for Jordan. If we can take those two hot button issues off the table, and the GOJ can show near-term tangible benefits for Jordanians following the cessation of hostilities, the likelihood of a strong showing by pro-reform candidates could increase significantly.

19. (C) In addition to taking policy steps to help create a more favorable political climate for democratic progress, we should also look for ways that the U.S. can help facilitate the election process itself programatically. Given the deep suspicions that the U.S. intends to "redraw the map" and impose its own political design on the Arabs, we must scrupulously avoid any appearance of trying to influence the election's outcome. Whenever possible we should assist the elections through NGO's and follow a multinational approach, possibly in cooperation with the Europeans and Japanese. We should also ensure that any assistance to candidates (e.g. speaker programs or training) be available to all potential candidates who do not pose any security concerns. Clearly, this is a delicate matter for the GOJ. That said, a careful offering of traditionally successful programs such as guest speakers on democracy and voter education programs could provide useful ways to spur popular interest and solidify credibility for the event and its outcome. If done right, the Jordanian example could help communicate to a wider regional audience that the vision of reform in the middle east is neither a distant possibility, nor a scheme to benefit outsiders in the West.

10. (C) We should also recognize that the elections and the campaign period leading up to them is likely to come during a period in which the economy is buffeted by the loss of the "special" economic relationship with Iraq that Jordan has enjoyed for the past decade in terms of cut price oil supplies and a protected market for Jordanian exports. The end of this relationship, plus the effects of lower tourism and export revenues expected to coincide with a war, is likely to mean job losses for low income Jordanians and higher prices for some oil products. To some extent, these effects will be concentrated in areas of the country -- poorer parts of Amman and the south -- that have been the biggest beneficiaries of the Iraq relationship.

11. (C) The short-term economic consequences of a war are likely to strain Jordan's political fabric, and to test the commitment to sound economic policies and fiscal discipline that has undergirded the impressive strength of recent economic performance. The King and his advisers are counting on economic assistance from the United States and other countries (including Gulf oil suppliers) to blunt the economic and political impact of these short-term disruptions by smoothing out the adjustment process over time. Still, maintaining the balance between smoothing the economic adjustment and avoiding loss of macroeconomic control in a pre-election environment will be a delicate issue on which we will have to work closely with the Jordanians.

GNEHM